

The Intelligence Background of the
Current Communist Offensive

File Area
5th
Latest version is 15th
March

The daily intelligence publications of the Central Intelligence Agency, distributed throughout the government, were reporting as early as 8 January that the Communists in Vietnam intended to launch a major and widespread offensive in connection with the Tet lunar new year season.

Evidence had been building up for several weeks before the attack actually began. The indications were plentiful in the coastal areas of I and II Corps, and in the provinces of the central highlands.

Heavy offensive preparations were also noted in the III Corps provinces around Saigon, and in the Delta, but the evidence there was less plentiful.

It was clear that the offensive would include attacks on some of the smaller provincial and district seats--as have major Communist campaigns in the past. It also appeared that the attacks might include strikes against some

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major urban centers such as Hue, Pleiku, and, possibly Saigon. The fact that the attacks would involve virtually simultaneous assaults against more than three-fourths of the province capitals and other major cities, however, was not anticipated, nor was it probably possible to do so on the basis of the available intelligence. The growing improvement of the enemy's ability to coordinate both the movement of his forces and the timing of his assaults had been apparent, particularly since the advent of his current "winter-spring offensive."

During the past several weeks, CIA's principal daily and weekly publications were reporting regularly on the enemy preparations and--within the scope I have described--warned of the apparent Communist intentions. On 8 January, for example, one of our publications (CIB) took note of the step-up which had already occurred in coordinated attacks by enemy forces "against government administrative centers and allied outposts" throughout the country. Between 6 and 11 January, our publications (CIB 8, 11 Jan; VietSit--Situation in Vietnam--6, 7, 8, 9, 10 Jan) directed particular attention to the increase in enemy actions against strongpoints and population centers in the Saigon area. On 8 January one of our publications (VietSit) described

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an attack on a provincial capital near Saigon and stated that "this type of enemy activity may continue. It could include mortar and rocket attacks on Saigon" and other nearby targets.

By 20 January (CIB), we were stating that Communist forces in the northern Iet Corps area "may intend to carry out simultaneous attacks against both the Ihe Sam area and population centers along the coast." We noted at least five North Vietnamese regiments in position to conduct attacks near the coast. On 24 January (CIB), we described the expansion of the threat into the Quang Nam - Quang Tin province area where the positioning of Communist units "has increased the threat to other allied positions ranging from Da Nang to Tan Ky." By 26 January (CIB), we reported that a "widespread coordinated offensive by enemy forces throughout the northern part of South Vietnam appears imminent."

Our publications during this period also indicated the possibility that enemy offensives in the northern provinces might be coordinated with attacks in the western highlands. On 23 January (CIB), CIA stated that the positioning of enemy forces, together with the material in

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captured documents, pointed to an "impending Communist effort against US and South Vietnamese forces and installations in Kontum and Pleiku." In the Delta area, our publications noted (VietSit, 11 January) during January that the "intensity of enemy activity has increased markedly" and that the Communists have evinced an ability to launch "coordinated mortar and ground attacks" in several provinces at one time.

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I might note that publications

of the US military command in South Vietnam contained many of the same warnings concerning enemy intentions as did our own.

Evidence as to the exact kickoff time of the enemy offensive was conflicting.

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By 23 January, analysis of this intel-

ligence led us to warn in our publications that

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[redacted]

5-day "may be set for as soon as 10 January." This had to be regarded as very tenuous, however, since the enemy in the past, although he had taken advantage of truce periods to improve his tactical position and to launch scattered attacks, had refrained from a general offensive.

Fragmentary material on the political objectives of the current Communist offensive has, in retrospect, been available for some months [redacted]

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[redacted] The information, however, has been extremely ambiguous, and somewhat contradictory. Much of it appeared too grandiose and unrealistic to be taken seriously as a guide to future Communist intentions. I speak in particular of hints that the Communists intended to launch a "general uprising." We simply did not, and still do not, give them the capability for doing so. We were thus reluctant to believe that they would risk potential disaster to their military machine by staking their future on a bid to spark such a revolution. It will probably still be some weeks before we can ascertain with any certainty whether this was their basic objective, or whether they really sought more limited political goals.

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